DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 188 167 CS 205 519

AUTHOR Duke, Charles R.
TITLE An Approach tc Revision and Evaluation of Student Writing.
PUB DATE Mar 80
NOTE 10p.: Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Conference on College Composition and Communication (31st, Washington DC, March 13-15, 1980).

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Evaluation Methods: Higher Education: Teaching Methods: *Writing (Composition): *Writing Instruction
IDENTIFIERS *Composition Process: *Revision (Written Composition)

ABSTRACT

An approach to evaluating student writing that emphasizes reformulation and deemphasizes grades teaches students that reworking their writing is a necessary and acceptable part of the writing process. Reformulation is divided into rewriting, revising, and editing. The instructor diagnoses student papers to determine significant problems on a priority basis (suggested by C. Koch and J. Brazil) instead of marking every writing error. All students write 14 to 15 essays of about 500 words per semester and have the option of selecting how many and which essays they will reformulate. Grades are assigned on the basis of a completed number of acceptable essays, with established criteria to determine acceptability in a modified contract system. In-class peer critique sessions, workshops, and individual conferences with the instructor are available during the semester. The following benefits result from the program: (1) the concept of writing as a drafting process is reinforced, (2) the separation between writing as a process and implications of grading writing as a product is increased, (3) students focus their attention on one problem at a time, and (4) students see what the writing process involves as being an asset rather than a liability and how writing can be less threatening and more meaningful. (AEA)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

ED188167

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH,
EDUCATION & WELFARE
NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF
EDUCATION

THIS DOCUMENT HAS BEEN REPRODUCED EXACTLY AS RECEIVED FROM THE PERSON OR ORGANIZATION ORIGINATING IT. POINTS OF VIEW OR OPINIONS STATED DO NOT NECESSARILY REPRESENT OFFICIAL NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION POSITION OR POLICY

AN APPROACH TO REVISION AND EVALUATION OF STUDENT WRITING

Charles R. Duke

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY
Charles R. Duke

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

CS205519

An Approach to Revision and Evaluation of Student Writing

Of all the problems in teaching writing, none is perhaps as consistently frustrating as deciding how to respond to student writing. In most instances, the basic process of responding will follow a pattern similar to this one:

Step 1. The teacher reads the paper and responds with understanding, puzzlement, anger, disbelief, joy--and probably a multitude of other reactions.

Step 2. The teacher identifies particular items that are inappropriate, inaccurate, unclear or unsuccessful, and revisions are suggested.

Step 3. The teacher summarizes the overall strengths and weaknesses of the paper and perhaps recommends a re-write or a revision.

Step 4. The teacher places some symbol on the paper to indicate its "worth" in the grading system used by the school that the student attends.

The first three steps in the pattern are natural parts of the writing process. In Step 1, the student writer reaches an audience; granted, the audience may be only one person, but still an audience is involved. This step does not call for a grade; instead, the teacher as reader responds to a piece of writing, showing all the natural reactions that any reader might. In Step 2, the identification of those items and passages which cause the various reactions in Step 1 may be an indirect basis for arriving at a grade, but it also may be seen as performing an instructional function, that of actually communicating with the writer about the reader's response. Step 3 requires summarizing and, again, is both instructing and evaluating, not grading. All three steps, then,are legitimate and useful actions for reflecting an audience's response.

The process breaks down at the fourth step where we must reduce an assortment of reactions and assessments to a single symbol. The last step, therefore, is the one completely foreign to the writing process. Even the professional writer does not have to deal with this dilemma; a publisher accepts a writer's manuscript on the basis of whether it will reach an audience and sell, not whether it has an A, B, C or D quality.

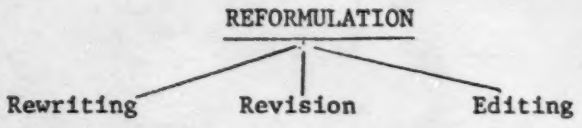
Too often the terms "evaluating," or responding , and "grading" are used synonymously. Evaluating, or responding--deciding what to say about a piece of writing--has instructional values we should never dismiss lightly; on the other hand, grading--the assigning of a conventional and public mark--has limited relevance to the writing process and often becomes counterproductive. Recognizing this situation is, of course, one thing. Knowing what to do about it is another.

For most students the composing process is truncated, leaving them with little conception of either the prewriting or rewriting stages. Much of the blame for this can be laid at the feet of composition teachers who traditionally have treated writing as a product, not a process. At the heart of responding to student writing should be the assumption that the instructor views writing as a process of prewriting, writing, and rewriting and understands that this process is not automatically accepted by students.

Information about prewriting and strategies for teaching it can be found in a number of sources.[1] Revision, though, remains a troublesome area, for a person may approach revision, or "reformulation" in several ways. This reformulation may occur through a highly developed sensitivity to the irregularities of writing which allows an individual to know intuitively that something is wrong; it may come through an analysis of each aspect of a piece of writing on a step by step basis; it may come as a result of the advice and guidance of critical readers; or it may occur as a result of combining all these approaches.

No matter how the person arrives at the idea of reformulation, the degree of involvement and the extensiveness of the reformulation will cause the activity to fall into one of three fairly broad categories. Writers may elect to rewrite, that activity where perhaps all but the major idea is discarded and a completely new draft is written; or we may decide upon revision which calls for the movement of paragraphs, perhaps placing an introduction as a conclusion and the conclusion as the introduction, or changing the order and form of several sentences, adding

examples or details; or we might move to editing, the "cosmetic touch-up" of the writing process where such things as spelling, punctuation and minor word adjustments occur. This division of reformulation can be represented in the following diagram:



Some writers go through all three phases, others two, and others only one. Much of the activity in reformulation will depend upon the writer's purpose and the degree to which the first draft meets that purpose. An understanding, however, of what reformulation can be is important, for most students regard the traditional comment of "revise" as simply an order to re-copy, improving penmanship and spelling but not addressing what may well be far more significant problems. To focus attention on reformulation as a natural part of the writing process, a writing program should deal with the following basic questions:

1. Who decides what needs to be revised?
2. What choices does the student have in revision?
3. Is sufficient time allotted for conferences where students can ask questions about their revisions and receive help?
4. How important is revision to success in the course?

In an effort to devise an approach that focuses attention on revision and response as opposed to product, I have incorporated into my writing courses several approaches for bringing students to a better understanding of the writing process while diminishing the fear of grading. Within the basic structure of the courses, students engage in frequent writing. However, the response to the writing and the handling of it differ considerably from the traditional approach of assign, read, and grade. A paper may be revised as many times as necessary before acceptance. All papers are responded to by the instructor and often by fellow classmates through in-class workshops. A paper is read each time to identify the major problem, leaving other, less significant difficulties until later. Carl Koch and James M. Brazil

provide a useful model for determining the significant problems in writing and offer this explanation for their priority listing: "Instead of marking every writing transgression in a student paper, we attempt to diagnose, on a priority system, the major problem of that writing and ignore all others. When a student no longer shows that problem in his or her writing, we then focus on the next priority for our diagnosis."[2] Koch and Brazil's priorities look like this:

I. Global concerns
   A. Rhetorical concerns
      1. Unity: logical development and flow of thought
      2. Focus: staying on the topic without wandering
      3. Coherence: "sticking together" of major parts of writing, use of transitions
      4. Pointedness: responding pertinently to the writing topic
      5. Sufficiency: saying enough to get the job done
      6. Value: the quality of thought

   B. Rhetorical structure
      1. Introduction
      2. Body
      3. Conclusion

II. Other structural concerns
   A. Paragraph structure
      1. Development: "backing up" of generalizations by using details, examples, illustrations, comparisons, and so on
      2. Coherence: one sentence "fitting" with or leading into another; using transition words or phrases

   B. Sentence style and structure
      1. Sentence fragments
      2. Run-on sentences
      3. Awkward sentences
      4. Wordy sentences
      5. Choppy sentences
      6. Illogical sentences
      7. Lack of sentence variety

III. Writing errors
   A. Subject-verb agreement
   B. Verb tense consistency
   C. Internal punctuation
   D. Capitalization (for beginning of sentences only)

IV. Mechanics
   A. Spelling
   B. Mechanics: use of apostrophes, hyphens, capitals, abbreviations, and numbers

V. Usage questions (e.g., hanged-hung, who-whom, can-may)

VI. Dialect features

Using such an approach means, of course, that a writer can spend considerable time on a paper, wrestling with whatever the problem may be and a number of reformulations may occur before the problems in a piece disappear; however, the writer's attention always focuses on the major problem so that energy and resourcefulness come to bear where they will do the most good.

All students write approximately fourteeen or fifteen essays during the semester, with each initial draft running about 500 words. Not all these essays will go through the reformulation process. Students have the option at all times of deciding which writing assignments they want to work on further. At the beginning of the course, students receive an introduction to the writing process through discussions and activities. At this time, they also receive a description of the evaluation process, a modified contract system.[3] A specific number of acceptable essays, with minimum word lengths, is identified for each grade level. Students receive a form similar to the one below upon which they can record their progress. Emphasis, however, is placed on what is meant by "acceptable," since the achievement of each level is not guaranteed simply by generating a certain number of words..

RECORD OF WRITING ACHIEVEMENT

Class: _____

Grade Level	Required No. of Acceptable Manuscripts	Achieved:
C	____(Minimum word length:_____)	Date:_____
		Date:_____
		Date:_____
		Date:_____
B	____(Minimum word length:_____)	Date:_____
		Date:_____
A	____(Minimum word length:_____)	Date:_____

Eight questions form the criteria for determining whether a piece of writing is acceptable or not; these questions are used during in-class workshops where peer response occurs; the questions form a basis for dialogue during conferences between

the instructor and student, and serve as a guide for the student throughout the writing process; hence the questions appear in several different settings and gradually the student comes to see them as the resource they are intended to be. Most writing instructors can generate such a list without difficulty, but the following one has proven useful:[4]

1. A writer promises to do something. What does the writer promise to do in this paper? How could you express that purpose in your own words? Does the writer keep the promise?

2. Can you see an order to the presentation of the writer's feelings and ideas? How would you describe that order? How well does the order relate to the subject under discussion in the paper? What other approach might the writer have used to improve the organization?

3. Has the writer omitted any important details or arguments that would increase the understanding of the writer's position on the subject? Are there details or arguments which do not seem to contribute to the ideas expressed in the paper? Where might the writer add or subtract details? Why?

4. How convincing is the writer's attitude toward the subject? How sincere do you believe the writer is toward what is being said? How can you tell?

5. How appropriate is the language to the author's intent and subject?

6. How well does each paragraph signal to the reader the direction in which the writer is moving? How fully does each paragraph develop the idea or feeling it introduces?

7. How well do the writer's sentence patterns and types relate to the subject?

8. Has the writer observed the conventions of spelling, grammar, punctuation, and capitalization? If not, what justification might there be for the unconventional use?

The instructor always reads an initial draft of a paper, but the draft may also have been read by a number of classmates through in-class critique sessions. Based on these responses, the student may attempt a reformulation of the essay, deciding if a rewrite, a revision, or an editing is called for; or the student may request a conference with the instructor, seeking additional clarification of the initial response, or seeking help in determining what approach might be most useful for solving the paper's difficulty. Once the paper has gone through another draft, the student may bring it to a conference with the instructor where the paper is read and

reacted to with the student.[5] The student learns at this point whether the paper is acceptable or not. If accepted, the finished paper goes into the student's file which the instructor retains. If the paper is not acceptable, student and instructor determine where the problems lie and decide upon the priority for dealing with them. This process may be repeated several times until the paper reaches an acceptable level of quality or the student decides that the paper should be put aside and energy be devoted to another piece.

This system calls for a tremendous amount of writing on the part of the student although not all reformulations necessitate a complete rewriting of a paper; often a problem confined to only one part of a paper may be handled in that section without requiring the student to recopy the rest of the essay. The workload of the instructor does not increase appreciably through this system even though papers may be read several times; each reading is highly focused and isolates the major problem; the instructor responds only to that, cutting down considerably on extensive annotation and time. Handling numerous drafts of an essay causes little confusion if students label their drafts and date or number them. Conferences, of course, play a key role in this approach. They are not required, but most students, after initial hesitation, use the conferences with regularity during frequent in-class workshops where short dialogues occur with some students while others work on their writing.

Several virtues of this approach seem apparent. First, the strong emphasis on writing as a drafting process receives reinforcement through such orientation. The student embarking on the exploration of a topic knows if it does not turn out well the first time, there will be a second, third or fourth chance. The student knows that the possibility of rejecting the draft after an initial try is also an option. A second virtue is the greater separation between writing as a process and implications of grading writing as a product. Although grades are not erased completely, students have support and time for making their best efforts, since help

is available throughout the writing process. When papers are returned, students no longer look for a grade and then throw the papers in the wastebasket; instead, attention goes to the response and the suggestions. A third virtue is that the student's attention is focused on one problem at a time instead of having to sift through the traditional "blood-bath" frequently seen on essays. This focus helps the student perceive important areas in writing and their relation to each other. Through constant exposure to this approach, the student begins to establish ways for assessing writing without always relying on the judgment of others. A final virtue, and perhaps the most important of all, is that the student begins to see what the writing process involves, how that process can be an asset instead of a liability in progress as a writer and, ultimately, how writing can become less threatening and more meaningful.

Charles R. Duke
Department of English
Murray State University
Murray, Kentucky 42071

Notes

[1]See Carl Koch and James M. Brazil, Strategies for Teaching the Composition Process, Urbana, Illinois: NCTE, 1978; also Linda S. Flower and John Hayes, "Problem Solving Strategies and the Writing Process," College English (December 1977), 449-461; and Lee Odell, "Measuring the Effect of Instruction in Pre-Writing," Research in The Teaching of English (Fall 1974), 228-240.

[2]Strategies for Teaching the Composition Process, Urbana, Illinois: NCTE, 1978, 103-104.

[3]Adapted from John V. Knapp, "Contract/Conference Evaluation of Freshman Composition," College English (March 1976), 647-653.

[4]Adapted from Robert Bain, "Reading Student Papers," College Composition and Communication (October 1974), 307-310.

[5]See Charles R. Duke, "The Student-Centered Conference and the Writing Process," English Journal (December 1975), 44-47 for suggestion about using conferences.